

[Laura Bickford]

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PUB. These Are Our Lives

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Submitted by: Seymour D. Buck - Newburyport, Mass.

Name of WPA Worker: Miss Laura Bickford.

Residence: Willow Ave., Newburyport, Mass.

Occupation: Laborer - WPA Household Aid Project.

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(This WPA project permits workers to enter homes of WPA families where there is illness, to perform the routine housework duties, washing, ironing, dusting, mending, sweeping, etc. etc.)

Personal Sketch:

A tall, thin, white-haired woman, aged between 45 and 50 (? Try and get it, absolutely'). Old-fashioned colthes clothes , snug-necked, long-skirted, cotton stockings. A little, round face hung on the end of a long, stringy neck, with mild, blue eyes peering almost startled out at the world. Gentle-voiced, extremely industrious, evidently frugal to a fault.

* * *

"Well, now, won't you come in? I'm glad you found me home early. I wouldn't have wanted to keep you waiting. I'm afraid there isn't very much I can tell you that matters very much."

Miss Laura Bickford led the way through the long, high-ceilinged hall and turned into the great square living room.

"Set yourself in the rocker by the window," she invited cordially. "I've had the shades drawn in here all day. It's not very cool, anywhere, but you'll get what breeze there is."

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"I'm afraid things aren't very tidy," she apologized, as she sat primly erect in a straight-backed chair, and smoothed her long, print dress carefully over her cotton stockings. "I have to let my own work go until night time. Sometimes I'm so tuckered, it seems as if I'd never get the rooks finished."

"My goodness, I suppose you think I'm foolish, living here with just my boy, in this big house. I'ts just that I've so many things of my folks'[,?] and really, there's no place to put them.

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"That's my grandfather," she laid softly, indicating a gilt-edged portrait hanging on the wall between the windows. A wide black ribbon was fastened diagonally across the upper corner, above the stern faced Puritan of an earlier generation.

Grandfather had one of the first dry-goods stores down in Maine. Father took it over after grandpa passed on. He was —"

She stopped talking long enough to address the little bundle of black and white that had darted soundlessly into the room. "Well, now, Betsy. Here, — sh-h——" and, tongue hanging limply from between his tiny jaws, the little terrier sank at her feet, digging his nails tentatively into the faded carpet.

"She's a blessing," Miss Bickford stated. "Sort of 3 gives me something to take care of, nights, when I'm alone, when my boy's gone somewhere. He always comes in early, and he's a good boy —"

"Excuse you for thinking I'm Miss Bickford? I am! I've another boy," she went on firmly, "he's twenty-one, now. My own sister's baby, he was, I took him from her arms the night she died!

"Robert? He's nineteen, come Octoober. He's awful smart, but he just don't seem to take hold; any job he gets. He just can't work in the shoe shops. The smell of the leather makes him throw. I know how that is. I was that way, even just working the packing room until one day I said to myself, "Laura, you got to throw, until it doesn't make you sick anymore, that's all." I was pretty sick, but you know, after that, I didn't mind the stitching room, or whatever."

"Robert, though. He's more like his father. Robert, his name was. I had come to Newburyport, to keep house for my brothers. They used to have the old bicycle shop down on Water Street, - it's the bowling alleys now. It just got so I couldn't be without him. He was sick, and we hadn't been together much more than six months before he

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died. Diabetis, they called it. It might of been, but I can still see him wakin' up in the night, hollering, "Goddam Heines! Look out, - there's another one." He'd 4 sweat something terrible, and almost choke the life out of me before he'd known what he was doing. It was everything - he couldn't forget what held been to, over there acrost the ocean.

Maybe it doesn't sound very religious, Mister, but I'll tell you now. I'd rather have had what I did of this life with my man, - and Robert, to take care of, than all the fine rich things those old fuddy-duddies up High Street have got to look act and leave to museums. They used to talk, some to them, but I notice there wasn't any of 'em hesitated to call me in to work by the day.

"I know my place, I hope, and I try always to stay in it. I guess as long as I'm willing to work for my bread, I'll always be able to find some way of doing it.

"I kind of got ahead oy my story, didn't I? I was going to say about how I went to work, in the first place. When I was a young girl, of course, there never was any need of it. There was a-plenty to do at home, I'll tell you. I remember my grandmother, Abigail, used to tell mother, she was Minnie [/?]Stevens, married my father, Tom Bickford from Concord, - "Gracious, Minnie, I hope that daughter Laurie (she always called me Laurie) never has to make her way in the world with her hands. She is the pokiest thing ——"

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Miss Bickford laughed, and smoothed an embroidered armchair coverlet with restless fingers. "Granny Abigail never did like to see people setting around," she said softly. "I'd used to like to dream about things, - about sailing away with my man on one of the big boats, and seeing foreign shores and all. Nearest I ever came to it was a motorboat ride down the Piscataqua River 's far as Portsmouth one summer, - and then, the boat broke down and we come home by carriage!

I and sister used to share helping with father in the store. I was near nineteen then, and one summer's night, - it was a Saturday night, we were putting the long sheets over the

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counters, and drawing the fancy little shade curtains down over the bolt goods, Ruthie grabbed my arm and pointed towards Pa. He was sitting up to his roll-top desk adding up the books. Now his head had just dropped down on the pages. We thought he was asleep and it wasn't until we'd got all ready to blow out the lamps, that we found he was - dead.

“Grammy Abigail still had her two little lace caps, - one for Sunday, and one for week-days, and still changed her apron at two o'clock, regular, exceptin' of course, Sundays. But there wasn't so much to eat, after the store was sold. The boys didn't any of 'em take much to farming, and they'd moved down the coast to Newburyport.

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Francis and Harry, - 'Bickford & McKenna - Bicycle Repairs' was the store. I wanted to go with them, but Ma said Ruthie was the one to take care of the boys. Did she think I wanted them to all be dead from eating burned bread and underdone pies?

“Well, now, it was almost three miles from our house across town to one of the big shoe factories. I went over there - got to the big brick building at just five-thirty on a Monday morning. I'd sneaked out of home,-and I wanted a job[.?] I waited, - and waited. About ten minutes of eight, who should come driving up in his buggy but our next door neighbor? I'd forgot all about his being there!

“It was my first job. As I told you, it used to make me throw, pretty bad, at first. Later on I got real good, and used to make as high as three dollars a week.

“Oh, didn't Ma put up a fuss. It was funny, but that was the first time I ever knowed Grammy to say something for me. She just turned to mother and said in her little dry voice, “Now, then, daughter, might's well make up your mind to't. - here's a daughter who'll fit in any harness.”

“I went and got pretty oilcloth out of my first pay and brought it home. I thought it would kind of brighten things up a little bit. Would Grammy eat of it? Never!

This one was awful pretty, too, with big bunches of grapes, and great big round apples and all. Grammy had to have a napkin spread down on it for her!

"I declare," she said coldly, "it ain't fitten for a Bickford to eat God's food off'n any such kind of cloth. Besides, - it smells something awful!"

"Ruthie didn't stay in Newburyport only about a year. She up and married, - she's out west, now, somewhere in New York state. Her husband travels for one of the big chain stores.

"My oldest boy's a store manager, too," she added proudly. "He manages one of the Kennedy stores down to Boston. There's one place I'd like to visit before I died! My goodness, I've done more dreaming about that place. I'd like to see where that poet Longfellow lived. I used to love that one about the laughing Allegra - "Betixt the dark and the daylight, - When the night is beginning to lower" — I wonder how you say that last, anyway? It wouldn't sound right to call it lower, to go with the hour in the next line would it? I suppose it's a matter of how you like, though, well, now.

"Whittier? Say, you know, it's funny. Goes to show how if you want something bad enough, and it's fitten for the Lord Almighty to give it to you, you'll get it, - one 8 time, - it was when I was working seamstress work, - after Robert was a little boy, and of course I'd give up working in the shoe shops, and all, — well, sir, this women was spending her summer up to the Lake; - Lake Attitash, you know, over in Merrimac, - well, sir, this big car came driving down the lane here, - looking for me! Yesserree, - they had gone and got a dress the lady wanted to wear and it all had to be made over right away ' she said coldly, Well, sir, - sewing machine and me, we had a drive up along the river, through Amesbury, - and the man in the uniform I asked him if he'd let me see where Whittier had lived, - he was the nicest man, - he smiled and said, "Sure." We was just coming up the hill toward the cemetary, then. He ups and turns in and drives right up to within about ten feet of the place

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where Whitteir's bones are laid. We drove, back, then, and up Friend Street. I seen the house, and the Friends' Meeting House.

Only thing was, he promised me not tell the folks. "They don't like me to do things for myself," he said. I wanted to tell them people how happy he'd made me, but I didn't want to get him into trouble, after his being so nice and all ——

"Yes, indeed. I've met some of the best. I can tell you, well, now, that rich Dr. Hurd's wife's one, - Agnes — I can't seem to made out her last name now, - it was years 9 back, - her man was a writer, over to Byfield they lived, - well, anyway, - I've made 'em stand still until their legs got good and tired, - and if I stuck a pin in 'em sometimes it didn't do them any good to holler! People always liked my work, seems like, always. I was helping poor Mrs. Pride then, - and my the prices she used to charge. It was sinful!

"Overcoats [wermade?] we made , - dresses, - everything you can think of! The more you charged to them, the better job they figured you'd done! I'd have liked to been able to buy her place and all when she passed on. I took to working out, by the day, instead. Robert's always needed a lot of things most boys don't need, - and it's took most every penny I could lay my hands on, just to keep going, times.

"Mrs. McWilliams spoke to you about my work? Well, now! You know, I true like to work, that I do. I'm never so happy, nowadays, as when I come, just tired all over. I fell good, just the same. I fell like how I'd earned the right to just set here and rock, and look out the window, - or maybe read a short story out of the Companion, or McCall's. Mrs. Peabody, - the minister's wife at the Episcopal church, - she saves me the Companion and McCall's. She tucked in some others, one time, —What ones? Oh, my goodness, let's see, now.

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American Mercury, seems like it was. That just roiled me all up, what reading I done in it. My goodness, I couldn't read things like that. It would keep me upset, from morning till night. That was the one, - a big, green-covered book. All it did was try to show you black

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was white, - or black wasn't the kind of black it seemed, I don't know what it was trying to do. I suppose some people like that sort, but as for me, I want to pick up a story where I know things will be really true, - where the man will do something wrong, and then be forgiven, - and where the woman's big enough to understand the man.

“Do I care if they marry? Why, - that's kind of a funny way of looking at it. No, I don't suppose so. I can't see's there's much difference, - my goodness, I shouldn't be saying this, - why, now, of course they'd ought to be married. Isn't every story like that? Well, now, I guess those writers wouldn't do these kind of things if it wasn't like it really is, would they, well, now?

“WPA? How did I come to get on it? Well, now, I hated to, like anything[!?] I'd prayed to the Lord Almighty to give me some kind of honest means of buying my bread and butter. Robert was to High School, and I did want him to be able to go to college. We'd lived the winter 11 in just three rooms, but it wasn't like a home'd ought to be here, at all.

It was the Mayor who did it for me. I'd been doing some work at his house, - there's quite a bunch of those up on the Street who are getting rid of their maids and like, and hiring the work done by day, - anyway, he'd asked if I'd like to do housework for him by evening, if he could get me a work on the sewing project. Well, now, I hated to, - my, my first week down there in the old Firestone Mill, I just couldn't bear to look at anybody, I felt so, - that Mrs. Palmer, used to be there, - likely you wouldn't know her, - she used to talk to me, some - “Laura, you got to work to eat! You got work here to do, - decent, respectable work, - and you do your work, and that's not charity, Laura,” she'd tell me. Finally I got to seeing it that way. The President had known things were pretty bad with a lot of us, and he'd given those who could work a chance. I been most grateful to him, ever since.

“I never liked the talk the women used to have, but i didn't pay much heed to it, though when they put the men over acrost the room making mattresses and comforters, I tell you it was a caution, some to of the things the women'd pass back and forth.

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"Perhaps I'm old-fashioned," Miss Beckford confided, 12 "but I always figured there was just two kinds of people anyway, - those who were deserving and those who weren't. The Lord Almighty'll be pretty good, all in all, about seeing that each gets what's coming to him. [of?] I knowt It's only when things come along, like right now it is, where they're having to lay some to of us off, - I guess it's in other places besides Massachusetts, too. What do they think has made it better for us to get along, all of a sudden?

"I've left the WPA twice this year, you know. Yessir, - to work in the shoe shops. There's a rule you have to take a job if they send for you, you know. Anyway, the first time I went, Mr. Weinberg told me I'd have to wait for a machine to be set up, - and it took them three days to find any place to set it up. By the end of the week I'd only made two dolars and seventy cents.

"The next time I got in, and next day the work all went bad. Somebody'd stopped an order they'd given, and the wasn't any work, anymore. It seems too [bad?] for me to have to lose out on my regular WPA work, but I suppose sometime I'll find the shop going steady.

"Pay? Why, I couldn't hope to make what I'm making on the WPA. But that would be working for somebody. - and it's a deal different than this made-work like they 13 call it. And there's so many others needing the work, too, I'd feel like I ought to get out and give them a chance, too.

"Newburyport's changed a whole lot, though. Years back there was plenty of work for everybody. But today, the people who live here and have got money all seem to feel like the rest of us must have come from Canada. All I hear is 'Why don't they send the d—— well, you know what I'm saying, don't you? - back to Montreal. They'd like to have these here summer visitors drive along and see the streets without WPA men leaning on shovels waiting for a inspiration or whatever, - just houses and gardens, - and lots of quiet - and like of that. No children? No children. That's the one thing they'd most like to have moved away is howling, fighting young ones!

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"I declare, it's too bad there isn't a part of the country all those kind could go to and live, and have another part where some of the rest with families could go, - only they'd want some room to move around in so's the youngsters weren't under foot all the time, - and, I suppose, everybody'd get tired of everybody else before it was done with.

"Still and all, when I've been over, nights, listening to the WPA band, - last year, that was, — there was plenty of young folks sparking around on the grass and 14 over under the trees, - I'm afraid they got to change humans a whole lot before they can stop them from loving each other, well, now.

"Well, now, I'm not going to run on like this any more. My goodness, let me light a lamp. I'd not noticed how near dark it was to, already."

She arose, removed a match from the little china container on the shelf, and carefully lighted the great, round globed lamp, with its sparkling clean chimney. As the glow filled the room, the old-fashioned furniture, the odd pieces of wood and china bric-a-brac on mantles seemed to fit into place. Here was yesterday! Talking was an old-fashioned woman, who, if she had put in words might have said, "Well, now, I'm sure everything will come out all right for every one of us that's deserving of the Lord Almighty's goddness and mercy. Maybe if we don't ask too much of Him, - things like we've got no right to expect, - maybe if we just work hard, He will even things up for us so that the WPA business, if it leaves us with nothing, will have been one more step along the pathway of the roads from Yesterday to the swift-moving, seemingly aimless traffic of Today's highway to Tomorrow.

"Pshaw, now," she said, as the terrier scuttled from beneath her feet, "this isn't treating you proper, well, now. Won't you have a little cup of tea? Oh, 15 I'm sorry not to have thought of things like that before. My goodness, I don't hardly know how I ever got to talking so with a complete stranger, - but, then, I don't s suppose we are strangers, - where we're both on the WPA, are we?

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"I hope you'll come in again, sometimes. I'm sorry that Robert wasn't home, tonight. He's such a good boy, and I'm sure he would have liked to met up with you. I'm sorry I wasn't able to be more help to you, - but you just let me talk on so, —

"Wind's swinging into the East again. Well, the farmers certainly need the rain. Well, now, come again, - and good-night, Mister."